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ABSTRACT

Noting recent research findings indicating that commonly used transition practices may not be well-suited to the needs of children and families, this report summarizes educational policy issues related to the transition to kindergarten and presents recommendations for policy changes. The report notes that the transition to kindergarten and the early grades is important because: (1) children establish competencies important to their school success and achievement during early elementary school; (2) early childhood learning environments are quite different from traditional elementary school settings; and (3) it is imperative to understand and shape the conditions under which public funds for early education can be best used. The report asserts that additional study is needed of localities that provide high quality transition practices in their communities, of how kindergarten classroom environments contribute to the quality of transitions, and of the knowledge and experience of kindergarten teachers and teachers-in-training related to transition planning. Policy change recommendations include strengthening bonds between preschools and elementary schools and requiring the formation of transition planning teams in localities. (KB)

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NCEDL Spotlights

No. 35 March 2002

Transition to kindergarten

This Spotlight is based on our policy brief "Transition to Kindergarten" written by Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia and Martha Cox of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to UNC-Chapel Hill and UVA, the other NCEDL partner is the University of California at Los Angeles. The policy brief, as well as an accompanying two-page fact sheet are online under products at <www.ncedl.org>.

What are the issues?

The transition to formal schooling is a landmark event for millions of children, families, and educators. But recent research by NCEDL and others indicates that the transition practices commonly used in schools may not be well suited to the needs of children and families.

There are several reasons why the transition to kindergarten and the early grades of school is important.

First, the early elementary years, particularly kindergarten, are important in establishing competencies critical to children's school success and achievement. These competencies involve children's social and academic skills as well as parents' involvement in the education of their children.

Second, early childhood learning environments are quite different from traditional elementary school classroom settings. Early childhood settings provide support for both children and families, recognizing the very clear developmental differences between preschool-age children and school-age children. The entrance to kindergarten is a point of considerable change and transition for families, children and staff. It is precisely these differences that transition practices attempt to bridge and overcome.

Third, increasingly large amounts of public funds are now dedicated to educating young children with the intent of boosting their chances for success in elementary school and beyond. It is imperative to understand and shape the conditions under which public funds can be best used.

In addition, children's experiences prior to kindergarten are different now than they were a generation ago:

- Kindergarten classes are larger and children have to deal with more children and more adults than in preschool.
- There is increasing emphasis on formal instruction and the acquisition of skills.
- Maturity demands are greater, such as sitting still for longer periods of time, self-control and attention.
- Children usually ride the bus without parents and with bigger children for the first time.
- More children now attend pre-school or are enrolled in non-familial care settings that give them experiences with peers and classroom-like environments.

What policy changes are needed?

- **Strengthen bonds between preschools and elementary schools.** Policies are needed that foster communication between preschools and elementary schools. Important topics for discussion include consistency in expectations and curriculum across programs. Such policies would greatly reduce the large shifts that occur in classroom quality, experiences and ex-pectations for children be-tween preschool and elemen- ary school.

- **Require transition planning teams in localities.** Such policies would mandate the formation of transition planning teams in localities involving school personnel, preschool staff, families, agency workers and community leaders. This collaboration would focus on better informing the public about preschool and early school opportunities for children, enhancing learning experiences for young children, and the development and implementation of transition practices that smooth the shifts between preschool, home, and school.

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What do we need to study?

Localities that provide high quality transition practices in their communities. Such a large-scale study would document the policies and procedures used in transition planning and implementation. This "best practices in transition" study would provide a rich set of descriptions that can give rise to core principles to guide transition planning and implementation across the country in the years to come.

How kindergarten class-room environments contribute to the quality of transitions for children. Such a study could greatly enhance our knowledge about class-room practices that support successful transition into the critically important early years of elementary school.

Survey kindergarten teachers and teachers-in-training. This would help to better understand their knowledge and experience in transition planning, and results would provide much-needed information for teacher development, both inservice and preservice programs.

If you want to know more

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What policy changes are needed?, cont.

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- **How kindergarten classroom environments contribute to the quality of transitions for children.** Such a study could greatly enhance our knowledge about classroom practices that support successful transition into the critically important early years of elementary school.
- **Survey kindergarten teachers and teachers-in-training.** This would help to better understand their knowledge and experience in transition planning, and results would provide much-needed information for teacher development, both inservice and preservice programs.

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